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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000723

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: YEMENI FM: POSTPONEMENT OF PLANNED AL SUMMIT IN
TUNIS A "SURPRISE"

REF: A. TUNIS 675

[1](#)B. TUNIS 673

[1](#)C. FBIS GMP20040326000139

[1](#)D. FBIS GMP20040328000016

[1](#)E. SANAA 671

Classified By: Ambassador Edmund J. Hull for reasons 1.5 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (c) Summary: Ambassador met with FM Qirbi on 3/31 primarily to discuss the reasons for the postponement of the Arab League summit planned for March 29-30 in Tunis. Qirbi characterized the March 27 announcement as a last-minute "surprise." Citing heated discussions on secondary issues, debates over semantics and the role of civil society, and the apparent rejection of undisclosed, proposed Tunisian changes to Charter documents, he suggested that Tunisia's leadership canceled the summit to avoid public disagreement. Qirbi commented favorably on the discussions of the various initiatives and said there was "60 to 70 percent common ground" among the proposals. He said that there are on-going communications between the foreign ministers and country leaders to address Tunisia's concerns and that he expects that Tunisia may still host the postponed summit. AID Representative and Pol/Econ Chief, as notetaker, also attended the meeting. End summary.

SIGNIFICANT "COMMON GROUND" ON PROPOSALS -- TUNISIA UPSET
OVER REJECTED CHANGES

[1](#)2. (c) Echoing other Arab leaders (ref b), on 3/31 FM Abu Bakr al-Qirbi told the Ambassador that postponement of the Tunis summit was a complete "surprise." He added that no explanation was offered and that during a recent interview (ref c) he had debunked a reporter's misconception that the U.S. pressured Tunisian President Ben Ali to cancel the meetings. Offering his best guess, Qirbi suggested that "hot debates" on secondary issues -- a report from the Council on Economic and Social Affairs, the AL's push to include materials on Arab language and culture at a Frankfurt book exhibit, and the role of civil society -- as a source of concern for Tunisia, despite the fact that a closed FM meeting had resolved the issues.

[1](#)3. (c) Qirbi said he thought the review of the different initiatives went smoothly, noting that "60 to 70 percent" of the proposals covered "common ground." He explained that they were close to finalizing the documents when the postponement announcement was made. He hypothesized that the Charter of Arab Consolidation proposed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria -- approved, with significant changes, by the FMs at the beginning of March -- may have been a further cause of concern. He complained that Tunisia wanted to make changes, but did not provide a paper outlining its request or explain its ideas to the FMs. His view is that Tunisia possibly may have been attempting to weaken the Charter, and that the drafting countries opposed the proposed edits. Qirbi also noted that bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia are continuing. He said that he suggested that Ben Ali, as chair of the summit, express his point of view in an opening address and have his ideas considered on that basis.

[1](#)4. (c) Commenting that most countries have made positive statements about AL reform, the Ambassador asked about the differing views among the countries. Qirbi responded by identifying three positions: Saudi Arabia-Egypt-Syria, Qatar-Yemen-Oman (and possibly Morocco) and the "silent group." He explained that press reports on the "Arab position" were not quite accurate because the articles pulled mostly from the Yemeni AL papers (ref e), along with the Sana'a declaration, neither of which were accepted by the Saudis or the Syrians. He cited the examples of Saudi Arabian concern about the word "democracy," Egyptian and Omani concerns about the role of "civil society" in reforms and debates on "governance" and the empowerment of women, but added that he believes that all parties have the same objective and that the differences can be reconciled.

CHALLENGE TO ADDRESS TUNISIAN CONCERNS AND MOVE FORWARD

[1](#)5. (c) Overall, Qirbi characterized the debates as healthy

and reflective of the concerns of each individual country which, for example, are different for Somalia than they would be for Saudi Arabia or Yemen. He also identified resolution of the Middle East conflict as the paramount issue for the AL and said that there was extensive discussion of the relationship of the Arab World with the U.S. and Europe, as well as their roles in implementing human and economic reforms. He concluded that the challenge now is to address Tunisia's particular concerns. Given on-going communications between the foreign ministers and country leaders for this purpose, he expects that Tunisia may get a second shot at hosting. The Ambassador thanked Qirbi for his advance briefing on the summit (ref e) and requested that he keep us informed of any developments.

16. (c) Comment: Qirbi's assessment of the reasons for the postponement overlap in some respects with Tunisia's private explanations (refs a and b), but notably did not highlight discord over any statements on the peace process nor the expected absence of key leaders. The very nature of the discussions -- various proposals somewhat messily debated and not perfectly wrapped up with a bow -- indicate that a democratic process was in play in Tunis. Qirbi's optimism that these debates will eventually produce a reasonable, agreed-upon result is clearly reflected in his continued private and public emphasis on the significant commonalties between the proposed reform initiatives and the Arab World's acceptance of the fact that government reforms are needed, even if the rate of progress toward democracy is slow and varies from country to country. End comment.
HULL